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ABSTRACT

Decades of research document the powerful academic and socio-affective benefits of a strong home language base and affirmation of home language and culture as a valuable resource. This article explores the implicit challenges, daily realities, opportunities, and practical implications of incorporating language and culture into classrooms as they relate to culturally and linguistically diverse language learners. It describes the daily realities faced by teachers, students, families, and communities, and then offers practical advice for all classroom educators. The following suggestions are given: accept the premise that children are members of diverse family and community systems bringing multiple gifts of language, culture, and wisdom; become an ethnographer: keenly observe children's language capabilities, both in the native language and English; encourage and accept children's attempts to communicate since errors are a normal part of language learning; provide many opportunities for children to communicate; plan authentic integrated communities that allow children to value and appreciate their identities; organize the physical environment to reflect the diversity of cultures in the classroom; build lines of communication among linguistically and culturally diverse families and educators; and initiate dialogues and advocacy work about language and culture among and across organizations and leaders capable of addressing the specific policy needs of young children. Contains many references to recent scholarship in the field and offers suggestions for further reading. (KFT)

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PRESERVING HOME LANGUAGES AND CULTURES IN THE CLASSROOM: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

by Lourdes Díaz Soto, Jocelynn L. Smrekar, and Deanna L. Nekcovei
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Introduction

Decades of research document the powerful academic and socio-affective benefits of a strong home language base and affirmation of home language and culture as a valuable resource (Soto, 1998). Yet policymakers across America continue to consider ways of eliminating diverse languages and cultures by proposing learning environments where English is the only language of instruction and culture is a minor issue. Examples of the political pressures affecting our educational system can be seen in the passage of California's Proposition 227, "English for the Children," earmarked at eliminating bilingual education programs; in the *Wall Street Journal* (April 10, 1996) where anti-bilingual advocates call themselves "bilingual education abolitionists"; in a Texas courtroom where the home language issue became a child custody issue (*NY Times*, August 30, 1995); and in the U.S. Congress where English-only legislation continues to be debated. For educators hoping to instill respect for cultural and linguistic diversity through bilingual and multicultural content, this climate of controversy offers both challenges and opportunities.

What are the implicit challenges (daily realities) and opportunities (practical implications) of incorporating language and culture in today's classrooms? This article explores these issues as they relate to culturally and linguistically diverse language learners, first describing the daily realities faced by teachers, students, families and communities, and then offering practical suggestions for all classroom educators.

The Challenges: Daily Realities

The increased linguistic and cultural diversity in the American classroom is a reality that many educators feel compelled to address. Demographic data from the U.S. Census show that, as of 1990, 14 percent of all children aged 5 to 17 (about 6.3 million) were reported as not speaking English at home. Moreover, the number of school-age children who did not speak English at home had increased

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significantly over the previous decade (National Association for Bilingual Education, 1992). Similarly, recent state-reported enrollment figures indicate that the number of English language learners in grades K-12 increased by almost 2 million during the ten year period between 1986-87 and 1996-97, from 1,553,918 to 3,405,915 (Macias, 1998). It is evident from these trends that educators will continue to face daily realities involving the interrelated issues of language and culture.

Yet, the fact that so many children in our classrooms represent multiple languages and multiple cultures is not a grim reality offering only challenges, but rather a unique opportunity to exchange valuable wisdom among learners, families, educators, and communities. Nor does such diversity threaten the cohesiveness of our nation and its democratic ideals; the diverse intergenerational wisdom shared by culturally and linguistically diverse families can support and strengthen America's goals. To this end, educators can choose to affirm, acknowledge, and respond to the importance of children's home languages and cultures (NAEYC, 1996).

Challenges and opportunities arise from multiple levels of the surrounding environment, levels which can be likened to different perspectives on the part of each player (Bronfenbrenner, 1989). For our purposes, the players are the teachers, children, families, and communities that make up a school or district. The following vignettes and discussion will help to illustrate the multiple experiences of these different groups.

Player 1: The Teachers

An early education center in an urban East Coast community serves over 150 linguistically and culturally diverse preschool children. The center's lead teacher voiced these concerns:

> We service very young children who are either still learning their native language, who are mostly English speakers, or are children who seem to lack dominance in any language. At our last staff meeting, we struggled with the language issue because it was not clear to us how we should proceed.

As the staff struggled with finding an effective approach for their diverse students, they ultimately asked parents and other family members what they thought was the best way to teach second language learners. While most were ambivalent as to the appropriate method, every family wanted to do what was best for their children. One Asian grandmother stated, for instance, "I would like all children to learn English quickly." Yet, she was cautious and concerned when she recalled how the family lost the ability to communicate with their teenage children.

From experiences such as the one described above, teachers are learning that an important step in teaching language learners is to allay concerns that they will not learn English quickly enough or succeed academically if they continue to speak their native language at home. The reverse is actually true (Collier & Thomas, 1989; Cummins, 1981) children who have learned concepts at home in their first language can readily transfer this knowledge to the second language. The major challenge for teachers and families is to work together to address the combined issues of language shift and lack of respect for home languages. In the vignette above, teachers and parents responded to the challenge by continuing the dialogue and implementing a curriculum that reflected their unique community of languages and cultures.

Player 2: The Children

Young children are caught in the often confusing political and policy making decisions of adults who find it difficult to respect home languages and home cultures. A Spanish-speaking child about to enter kindergarten recently asked:

> Do you know if I can speak Spanish in school? Marcy told me that if you use Spanish words in school...the teacher punishes you. She said three `Mejicanos' could not go out to play... because they kept forgetting. Can you find out if I will be punished too?

Unfortunately, accounts of children being singled out and punished for speaking their native language have been reported by educators across the country. The practice of punishing children in response to speaking a language other than English does not consider their backgrounds and experiences (Bredekamp & Coppolo, 1997). In addition, punishing children for home language use is a violation of their linguistic human rights (Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson, 1995). Educators are in the position of being able to give native language speaking children support and encouragement as they are attempting to make sense of their world while learning to communicate in the second language.

Player 3: The Families

Linguistically and culturally diverse families also struggle with issues of language shift and lack of respect for home languages and cultures (Soto, 1997). One poignant example involves a Latino family who, like many other families, received the following advice from a well-intentioned Kindergarten teacher:

> La missy nos dijo (the teacher told us) that we should speak English-only at home. She warned us that if Graciella could not speak English (fluently) by the end of the year, she would be held back. We told Abuelita (Grandmother) not to talk to Graciella because she would only confuse her. But Graciella spends so much time with Abuelita that we wonder if that is such a good idea. What do you suggest we do?

Giving advice to speak English-only at home can have tragic outcomes for culturally and linguistically diverse families (Wong Fillmore, 1991). Home languages and home cultures are at the heart of the communicative process for families; thus, teachers who provide advice that is congruent with research evidence, mainly that a strong home language base actually facilitates children's second language learning, are in many ways providing a gift to their students.

Player 4: The Communities

The Wall Street Journal article (April 10, 1996), referred to earlier, documents the intentions of a group of English-only proponents ("bilingual education abolitionists") in a Pennsylvania school district. Hoping to dismantle the district's bilingual education program, the group initiated a series of public meetings to discuss the issue. Debate over the educational goals of the community became increasingly divisive, with the school board calling for police protection to maintain order. This was unwarranted, as the bilingual families who were participating in the meeting were not acting aggressively, but had simply knelt and prayed to demonstrate their belief in the value of the bilingual program for their children.

Preserving Home Languages and Cultures in the Classroom

What is interesting for educators to note about such bitter community battles over multicultural education is that they contrast sharply with what happens in most nations of the world. Schools in Denmark, Sweden, France, Greece, Germany, Hungary, Scotland, Canada, Australia, Africa, and England, have long included second language learning opportunities for even their youngest children. Teachers are also expected to have second language skills; in Luxembourg, for example, the typical teacher is competent in French, German, English, and Letzeburgesch (Peck, 1993).

The opportunity for communities to be knowledgeable about languages and cultures was outlined a decade ago by the President's Commission on Foreign Language and International Studies (1980):

> The United States is blessed with a largely untapped resource of talent in the form of racial and ethnic minorities who, by being brought into the mainstream of educational and employment opportunities ... can be expected to make rapid, new, and valuable contributions to America's capacity to deal persuasively and effectively with the world outside its borders (p. 24).

Daily Realities Recapped

The above vignettes illustrate the challenge of acknowledging and responding to children's home languages and cultures in the midst of so much controversy and at the multiple levels of children's learning environments. Out of this challenge, however, arises the opportunity for educators to provide their students with the gift of their home language and culture, and to help them reap the academic and socio-affective benefits of such an approach.

The Opportunities: Practical Implications

What are the practical implications for teachers working with diverse learners? Although selecting effective methods for addressing diversity is complex, and existing research sometimes contradictory, there are strategies that will enable children to value and appreciate their family's identity, to feel secure about using their home language, and to respect the cultural diversity of their classmates. Below is a list of practical applications for teachers that recognize and honor children's multifaceted linguistic and cultural abilities:

Preserving Home Languages and Cultures in the Classroom

Accept the premise that children are members of diverse family and community systems bringing multiple gifts of language, culture, and wisdom *(Soto, et al., 1995; Soto, 1996)*

- Work toward the preservation of home languages and cultures in order to enhance family communication and children's identities (Chang, 1993)
- Learn and share knowledge about the wisdom gained from culturally diverse families, including consensus building
- Maximize cultural courtesies that demonstrate respect for the community, the family, and the child
- Create bonds among caregivers and families that build relationships and model extended family values

Become an ethnographer; keenly observe children's language capabilities, both in the native language and the second language *(Genishi, 1989)*

- Observe and record authentic language use (Soto, 1991)
- Create a portfolio documenting language growth and progression in both formal and informal contexts (Salinger, 1996)

Encourage and accept children's attempts to communicate since errors are a normal part of language learning *(Bredekamp & Coppolo, 1997)*

- Adopt a learner-centered teaching style: responsive and nurturing (Smrekar, 1994)
- Disseminate information to families that helps them to understand the role home language plays in child development and family cohesion
- Afford opportunities for teachers, children and families to share linguistic and cultural knowledge

Provide many opportunities for children to communicate *(Smrekar, 1994)*

- Arrange the classroom with spaces that encourage social interaction
- Schedule ample pretend, free play, and dramatic experiences in order to facilitate peer social interaction
- Foster optimal language learning with good language role models in both the home and the second language (Wong Fillmore, 1992)

Plan authentic integrated activities that allow children to value and appreciate their identities *(Gutwirth, 1997; York, 1991)*

- Routinely integrate accurate (not exotic) art, music, children's literature, games, and foods representing a variety of cultures; afford children the opportunity to participate in planning and preparation of activities
- Schedule trips, classroom visits, art, music, and storytelling activities guided by parents and elders that reflect children's home cultures and languages

Organize the physical environment to reflect the diversity of cultures in the classroom *(Morrison & Rodgers, 1996)*

- Furnish the classroom with multicultural dolls, authentic art, children's literature, music, authentic dramatic play props, games, and posters that ensure an aesthetically pleasing (not commercially oriented) learning environment
- Establish learning centers that can be utilized in multiple ways (e.g. dramatic play) and reflect various roles and occupations; develop prop boxes of multicultural items (Boutte, Van Scoy, & Hendley, 1996)
- Choose accurate materials that avoid stereotypical associations or inaccurate contemporary portrayals
- Display family portraits, collages, life-size drawings of the children and families

Build lines of communication among linguistically and culturally diverse families and educators *(Cummins, 1996; Smrekar, 1994; Soto, 1997; Wong Fillmore, 1991)*

- Invite parents and elders to share stories, wisdom, and cultural traditions
- Plan occasions that will warrant parents' and elders' participation such as children's multicultural dramatic play events, community feasts and celebrations
- Encourage parents to maintain and share their home language and customs
- Share suggestions with colleagues during professional development activities, faculty meetings and informal interaction so that they, too, can become well-informed and advocates for their students

Initiate dialogues and advocacy work about language and culture among and across organizations and leaders capable of addressing the specific policy needs of young children *(Soto, et al., 1995)*

- Strengthen communication among nationally recognized organizations involved in meeting the needs of bilingual/bicultural children
- Promote community education that articulates the very real needs of children and families in America
- Write letters to newspapers, politicians, organizations, and leaders offering them opportunities to work on behalf of culturally and linguistically diverse learners

Conclusion

The political and educational challenges discussed above offer substantial opportunities for developing socially competent communities responsive to issues of social justice. Our willingness to view children's home language and culture as an important resource is an opportunity to enhance our nation's mission for a democratic society. Our ability to implement the kinds of educational strategies described in this article affords educators, families and communities a myriad of opportunities to share their collective wisdom.

Let us pretend for a moment that as a nation, we accept the challenge to preserve children's rights to be culturally and linguistically competent by affirming children's home language and home culture. Imagine the wisdom that America can reap from such diverse linguistic and cultural traditions. At a time in our history when we are concerned with our youth, with violence and racism, with the environment and popular culture, it is in our best interest to share knowledge across communities, knowledge that helps us to implement collaborative and consensus building approaches, to preserve and respect our environment, to gain peace and harmony in our daily lives, to be considerate of the needs of future generations, to appreciate group success and community spirit, to develop child-rearing practices that are child-centered and revered endeavors. Collaboratively, we can reach a better place. Together, we can help to achieve an increasingly democratic and just nation.

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